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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000716

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PLOTTERS SENTENCED, SMALL PROTEST HELD

REF: MUSCAT 684 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard L. Baltimore III.
Reason: 1.4 (d).

Summary

1. (C) The State Security Court handed down sentences ranging from 10-20 years for most of the 31 defendants tried on charges of participating in an illegal organization and plotting to overthrow the government. Although no judicial appeal process is available to the defendants, they can appeal their sentences to the Sultan. It is likely that most or all of the defendants to be pardoned within a year or two. Meanwhile, the police carefully monitored a rare protest march in favor of the defendants on the evening of May 1, in which 100-200 young men participated in a peaceful and orderly manner. End summary.

Verdicts Handed Down

2. (U) On May 2, the State Security Court announced verdicts for the 31 defendants (reftel) charged with belonging to an illegal organization and plotting to overthrow the government. Preliminary information indicates that six defendants received 20-year sentences, twelve received 10 years, twelve received 7 years, and one was sentenced to 1 year. Among the highest profile defendants were Shaykh Mohammed al-Shi'ailli, the official in the Royal Diwan responsible for organizing summer religious study programs, who received a 20-year sentence; and Shaykh Kahlan al-Kharusi, a senior official in the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs who headed the Omani hajj delegation to Mecca this year, who received a 10-year sentence. At least one press source quoted Court President Hilal bin Hamad al-Busaidi as saying there was process available for appealing the verdicts, and also affirming that the Sultan could pardon defendants at his discretion.

Rare Protest March

3. (SBU) A protest march in support of the defendants and involving 100-200 Omani men took place on the evening of May 1 in the al-Khuwair neighborhood of greater Muscat, at least five kilometers from the chancery. Many of the participants (males only, predominately in their 20's and 30's) are believed to have been from among the students of several of the arrestees who taught in academic institutions or in local mosques. Some family members are also believed to have taken part.

4. (SBU) Calls for the demonstration, with details on time and location, first started spreading on the Internet message board al-Sablah on April 30. The word was further spread through cellular phone text messaging. While demonstrations are a rarity in Oman and take place, when they do, without legal sanction, both police and demonstrators typically adhere to an unwritten code of conduct. In the May 1 march, the police allowed the demonstrators to coalesce following maghreb prayers (around 7 pm) at the Said bin Taymur Mosque and begin their procession towards a commercial intersection about two miles distant through a largely residential neighborhood. Riot police barricaded their route at roughly the halfway point, however, before the marchers entered a more heavily trafficked commercial zone. The protesters then returned along the same route to the Said bin Taymur Mosque before dispersing. No arrests were reported or observed to have taken place, and the demonstrators remained at all times peaceful and orderly.

Comment

5. (C) The sentences handed down were generally in line with expectations. The Sultan will probably pardon most or all of the defendants long before they serve a substantial portion of their sentences, perhaps as early as the 35th National Day celebrations -- coinciding with his 65th birthday -- in November. We suspect the government is sensitive to the

notion that a vocal segment of the public -- particularly among Ibadhis -- is still unconvinced that the mainstream officials and scholars from among the defendants had any intent to overthrow the government in favor of an Ibadhi religious leader (Imam). Perhaps by coincidence, the demonstrators began their march from the Said bin Taymur Mosque, named for the Sultan's father who also happened to be the one that abolished the Ibadhi Imamate in the 1950's. While the case has touched a nerve in Omani society, it is unlikely to generate any significant public protests.

BALTIMORE